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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000493

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(SWEET)  
NSC FOR ABRAMS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: WHAT SUCCESSION SCENARIO?

REF: A. TUNIS 394 AND PREVIOUS  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 387  
[1](#)C. 06 TUNIS 55

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (S/NF) Even as most Tunisians are resigned to the fact that President Ben Ali is likely to announce his candidacy for the 2009 Presidential elections this summer, who will succeed him in 2014 (when he will not be eligible to run) remains a question no one can answer. There has been no major cabinet reshuffle since August 2005, despite the Prime Minister's long-standing hope to retire. The few government or ruling party officials who are known to Tunisians lack any significant popularity. While that is not surprising in this autocracy, the regime is likely to rally around whomever Ben Ali selects. The political staleness is reminiscent of the end of the Bourguiba era. End Summary.

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RUN, BEN ALI, RUN!...  
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[1](#)2. (S/NF) For over a year, Tunisia has been awash with statements, banners and posters calling on Ben Ali to announce his 2009 presidential candidacy. According to the constitution, 2009 is the last time Ben Ali will be eligible, as presidential candidates must be under the age of 75 (Ben Ali will be 78 in 2014). As in years past, Ben Ali is expected to declare at the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party congress in late July. But if anyone knows for sure, they aren't saying. Even Foreign Minister Abdallah told the Ambassador that he did not know if Ben Ali would run in 2009, saying the President had said nothing, "even in private," about his candidacy. However, there are no signs Ben Ali plans to step aside. While Ben Ali's health is always a subject of rumors, his physical appearance and mental state appear unchanged. Further, recently he made two major trips abroad (to the EU-African Union Summit in Lisbon in December 2007 and the March 2008 Arab League Summit in Damascus), after several years of limited travel.

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...BUT RUN THE COUNTRY TOO  
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[1](#)3. (S/NF) While six more years of Ben Ali as president increasingly appear a foregone conclusion, Tunisians are increasingly tiring of the "Blessed Change" he brought in [1](#)1987. Today, the country is witnessing the beginnings of an economic crisis, with high world oil and food prices

burdening a populace already stressed by high unemployment. Social unrest -- unheard of in Tunisia since the Bourguiba era -- is on the upswing (Refs A and B). Given the economic challenges, the lack of political dynamism is particularly noticeable. Ben Ali reshuffled some of the so-called "technical" ministers (health, commerce, tourism, communications technologies) in the past year, but the last major cabinet reshuffle was in August 2005, when the current ministers of Defense (Kamel Morjane) and Foreign Affairs (Abdelwaheb Abdallah) were appointed. The Minister of Interior (Rafik Belhaj Kacem) was appointed in 2004, while the Minister of Justice (Bechir Tekkari) and the Prime Minister (Mohamed Ghannouchi) have both held their positions since 1999. Some Tunisians joke that Ben Ali has not needed to change ministers because he finally found a group that do exactly what he wants -- nothing. Even when ministers are replaced, the top-down decision making process means few changes, and even less progress is expected in the run-up to the 2009 elections.

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THE SCENARIO  
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¶4. (S/NF) As Ben Ali has, over the years, suggested that he plans to retire one day; we expect that he will want to select his own successor. It is unlikely, given the current political climate and his upcoming presidential campaign, that Ben Ali will begin to publicly groom a successor in the next year. But following the October 2009 elections, the regime, the ruling party and the country will be looking for signs of what's next. Prime Minister Ghannouchi, perhaps the

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most popular GOT official, has been rumored for years to want to step aside. Therefore, some believe Ben Ali might name his future successor Prime Minister, the position he held before seizing power from former President Bourguiba through a bloodless coup in 1987. Appointing his successor as Prime Minister also allows for a smooth transition in the event of Ben Ali's death, as, under the constitution, the Prime Minister organizes new elections if the president dies in office (Ref C). Alternatively, Ben Ali could select someone outside of the GOT or even decide to create a vice presidency to prepare his successor.

¶5. (S/NF) Whoever Ben Ali selects, either personally or through consultation with other regime insiders, will need the support of the RCD. The ruling party politically controls much of the country through a network of cells and regional offices and is responsible for mobilizing the population. Similarly, the security forces would have to support any successor. The iron fist beneath the RCD's velvet glove, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) controls the population and prevents unrest through proactive repression, although its employees cannot vote. While it is impossible to imagine a successor gaining power without the support of the RCD and MOI, unlike other countries in the region, Tunisia's apolitical military has little influence, and, under civilian leadership, seems to have little interest in politics.

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THOSE IN THE RUNNING  
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¶6. (S/NF) Sometimes it seems like every Tunisian we ask who the next President or Prime Minister will be has a different answer. The fact is, Ben Ali seems to actively prevent -- and discourage -- any one individual from gaining significant popularity. However, a handful of current GOT officials appear to have the necessary experience to head the Prime Ministry. These officials, many of whom are party and regime stalwarts, are among the most likely Ben Ali successors given their experience and loyalty:

-- Mondher Zenaïdi (Minister of Public Health, DOB 10/24/50): Known as a "fixer," Zenaïdi was shifted from the Minister of Commerce to his current position in late 2007 to address rising complaints about the Tunisian health system. With a wealth of economic experience in a number of ministries, and a long history of RCD activism, Zenaïdi is increasingly rumored to be a candidate for the Prime Ministry. However, he is largely unknown among Tunisians and needs to demonstrate success in the troubled health sector before he will gain public support.

-- Abderrahim Zouari (Minister of Transport, DOB 4/18/44): Despite his unassuming position, Zouari has held almost every important government and ruling party portfolio. Twice RCD Secretary General, Zouari has also served as minister of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Education, Tourism and Youth, Sports and Childhood. He also has experience in the Prime Ministry, Ministry of Interior and Agriculture. There is no one in the GOT today with as much experience in so many government organizations.

-- Mohamed Nouri Jouini (Minister of Development and International Cooperation, DOB 10/13/61): Appointed in 2002, US educated Jouini is considered one of the GOT's most influential -- and talented -- technocrats. One of only two Cabinet members under 50, Jouini is reform-minded (at least on economic issues) and less bureaucratic than any other GOT interlocutor. Over the years, he has sought to advance the US-Tunisian economic relationship and created a surprisingly flexible and responsive GOT ministry.

17. (S/NF) There are also a couple of younger regime insiders who could be potential Presidential successors despite their low profiles:

-- Rafaa Dekhil (Minister of Communications, DOB 10/2/53): Thought to have received his position simply for the "benefits," Dekhil is rumored to be close to First Lady Leila Ben Ali. Most of his prior experience was in the private sector, which leads many to conclude that he has influence with the First Lady's Trabelsi clan.

-- Ahmed Ouerdarni (Presidential Chief of Staff, DOB 2/19/53): Ouerdarni's position in the Presidential Palace makes him almost invisible to those outside the GOT. Post

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cannot recall ever meeting Ouerdarni, unlike the more influential but aging Presidential Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia. Ben Ali named Ouerdarni to the RCD Political Bureau in 2006, a significant step as the other members are senior ministers and party officials. While that may have been designed to make the RCD look younger, Ouerdarni enjoys rare proximity to Ben Ali.

18. (S/NF) Finally, a handful of dark horse candidates are also rumored to be in the running for the Presidency:

-- Leila Ben Ali (First Lady, DOB 10/24/56): Almost everyone in Tunisia believes Leila has presidential ambitions, which most Tunisians firmly reject. A hairdresser before meeting the married Ben Ali, many believe Leila -- and her Trabelsi clan -- represents the antithesis of Tunisia - uneducated, uncouth and nouveau riche. There is also widespread criticism of her and her family for corruption. While at times she is squarely in the public eye, lately she has taken a more private role.

-- Sakher Matri (Businessman, DOB 12/2/81): Married to Leila and Ben Ali's daughter Nesrine and scion of a well-established family of prominent businessmen, Matri has significant business holdings in Tunisia and, reportedly, abroad. Often more active behind the scenes than publicly, Matri's star appeared to be rising in late 2007 when he was granted the license for a new Quranic radio station and was positioned next to Ben Ali at a major religious event in

October and at the arrival ceremony for the late April 2008 state visit of French President Sarkozy.

-- Kamel Morjane (Minister of Defense, DOB 5/9/48): Sometimes called the American candidate, Morjane is relatively new in the Ben Ali regime. Prior to his ministerial appointment in 2005, Morjane served at the United Nations for years. It is unclear how much influence or popularity he enjoys inside the GOT. However, on occasion, he has demonstrated he has the ear of the President and the savvy to get things done.

¶9. (S/NF) There are several other GOT officials who may be mentioned as potential successors. However, they appear to have limited chances, principally because of their age and the assumption that Ben Ali will run again in 2014. These officials include: Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem, Minister of Social Affairs Ali Chaouch, Chamber of Advisors President Abdallah Kallel and RCD Vice President Hamed Karoui.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (S/NF) As is true on many topics in Tunisia, those who are willing to give their opinions on succession are often out of the loop, while those who may be in the know remain silent. With many of Ben Ali's most senior and influential officials (such as RCD VP Hamed Karoui) aging and ailing, it may be that the President is simply biding his time. Having overthrown his own predecessor, Ben Ali may be reluctant to cede too much power or knowledge, even to a hand-picked successor. Whatever the case, Tunisia clearly needs an infusion of new blood, energy and activism. Many of the current ministers seem to have what it takes to lead the country to the next level of development, but, for the time being, no one is sticking his or her neck out.

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